

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

November 15, 2004

Mr. Steven C. Huttula, Jr.
PO Box 2666
Clackamas, Oregon 97015-2666

Dear Mr. Huttula:

Thank you for your message regarding our Nation's veterans. We appreciate hearing your views.

President Bush and all Americans are grateful for the service and sacrifice of our Nation's veterans. By answering the call of duty and risking their lives to protect their fellow citizens, these patriots have strengthened and inspired our Nation with their courage and compassion.

President Bush's fiscal year 2005 budget proposes to increase funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to \$68 billion from the 2001 level of \$48 billion. This VA budget supports important priorities for veterans: high-quality health care; timely and accurate claims processing; and providing deceased veterans with a final resting place. The President looks forward to continuing to work with the Congress to ensure passage of his VA budget for 2005.

Since 2001, President Bush has increased VA health care funding by more than 40 percent. The President's record increases have enabled the VA to improve health care for veterans with service-related disabilities, low incomes, and special health care needs. The VA has expanded access to health care for 2.5 million more veterans, increased outpatient visits from 44 million to 54 million and the number of prescriptions filled from 98 million to 116 million, and opened 194 new community-based clinics. In 2004, the VA will facilitate treatment for veterans who have been waiting more than 6 months for basic medical care.

The Bush Administration is also working to reduce VA disability claims processing time and decrease its backlog by implementing the recommendations of the Claims Processing Task Force. Since 2001, the VA's average time to process a disability claim has been cut by 30 percent.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 also resolved the important issue of concurrent receipt in a fair and responsibly way. Now, military retirees with 20 years of creditable Federal military service and with combat injuries or at least 50 percent disability rating for non-combat related matters will be able to receive VA disability benefits without having to offset the amount from their military retirement benefits. This change reversed a century-old law preventing concurrent receipt.

President Bush has also signed into law significant legislative proposals that demonstrate his enduring commitment to our Nation's veterans:

- To further expand benefits for veterans and their surviving spouses, President Bush signed the Veterans Benefits Act of 2003 on December 16, 2003. This new law allows many surviving spouses of veterans who die of a service-related cause to qualify for restoration of benefits that were taken away when they remarried, makes it easier for disabled veterans who own businesses to sell their goods and services to the Federal Government, gives a 13 percent higher college-assistance payment to surviving dependants of those killed in the line of duty, and lowers the fee charged to Reservists who take advantage of the VA home loan program.
- On Veterans Day 2003, President Bush signed into law the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003, which establishes within 4 years six new national cemeteries in southeastern Pennsylvania; Birmingham, Alabama; Jacksonville, Florida; Bakersfield, California; Greenville/Columbia, South Carolina; and Sarasota, Florida.
- The President also signed the Military Family Tax Relief Act of 2003, which provides tax relief and other benefits to members of the Armed Services and their families.

Your views are helpful as we continue to work with the Congress, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Department of Defense on behalf of our veterans. Please visit the White House website at www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/veterans for more information on this important issue. Best wishes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heidi Marquez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Heidi" and last name "Marquez" clearly distinguishable.

Heidi Marquez
Special Assistant to the President
and Director of Presidential Correspondence